



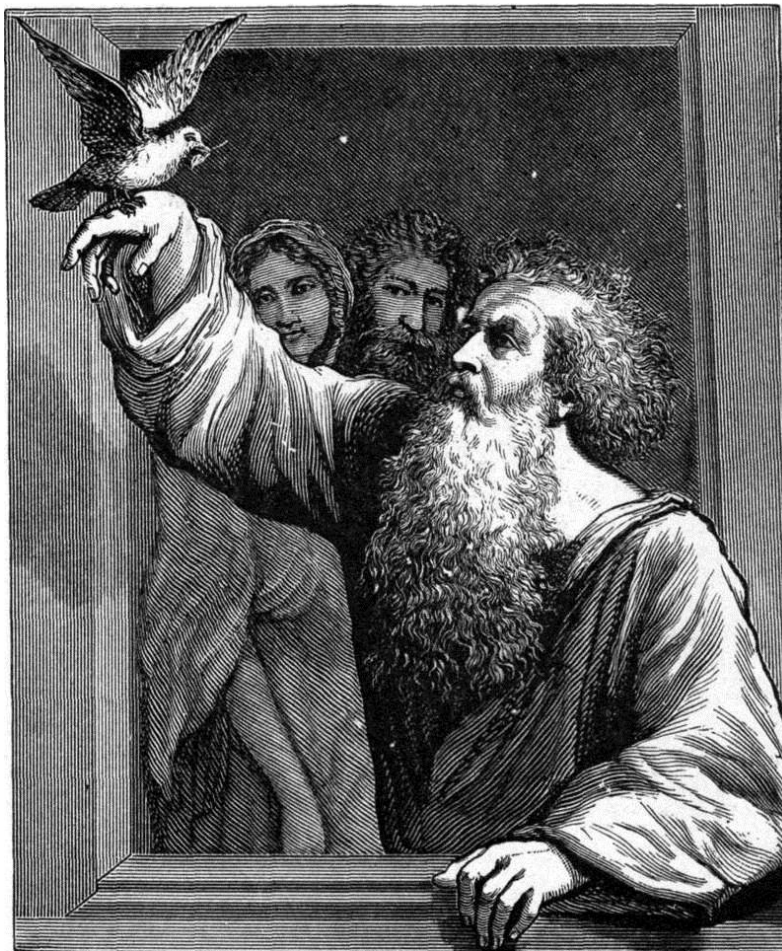
Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

First Sunday of Advent A



Noah sent out this dove. 1897. Foster Bible Stories.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2. **Blessing of an Advent Wreath**

Before your group lights the first candle of the Advent wreath, the following blessing may be prayed.

Leader: The kingdom of God is at hand.

All respond: Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Leader: Let us call to mind God's mercy and salvation as we wait in hope during the days and weeks of Advent. As we gather around this wreath let us remember God's promise to be with us until the end of time.

Scripture is read. Isaiah 9: 1-2a.

All respond: Thanks be to God.

After a time of silence, all join in prayers of intercessions and in the Lord's Prayer.

Leader: Let us ask God to bless our wreath and to bless us.

After a short silence, the leader prays:

Heavenly Father,

We praise and thank you for the great gift of your Son Jesus, the Christ.

You sent him as a Light to the nations.

You sent him to reveal your Light and Love to a world darkened by sin.

Christ is our hope and our salvation.

Upon him we place all our trust.

He is Emmanuel, the promised Messiah.

He brings wisdom and peace to a troubled world.

Lord God,

bless this wreath and

bless those who gaze upon its light in hopeful anticipation.

Come, Lord Jesus, come in haste, come!

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

The first candle is lighted.

Leader: Let us praise God, the ruler of the universe.

All respond, making the sign of the cross:

The God who made heaven and earth!

The blessing concludes with a verse from "O Come O Come, Emmanuel"

Liturgical Context

- ▶ Advent is a time not just of expectant waiting but of profound renewal.
- ▶ The cosmos joins the cries of human longing for the Christ—the One who came once in history, who comes each week in our hearts and who will come again at the end of time.
- ▶ There is a reminder of the judgment that awaits us all throughout the entire season.
- ▶ The symbolism of the Advent wreath reminds us of the tension between light and darkness. We are reminded of the darkness the earth once knew as it waited for the coming of the Light of the World—the Christ. A candle is lit each week illustrating the gradual increase of the Light that dispels the darkness.
- ▶ The Advent wreath cradles our primary symbols--wood and light. “The wood refers to the ‘living greens’ that are used to make the wreath...The wood or pine embodies the primary symbol of the cross. It is the wood of the cross which will become the sign of our salvation at Easter whereby all are saved by the ‘wood of the cross’. The four candles represent Christ, the Light of the World!”¹ Four purple candles, or three purple candles and one rose candle [for Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent], or four white candles may be used in the wreath.
- ▶ Mary slowly emerges as a primary character in the unfolding drama of the season. John the Baptist takes center stage as a primary player in the ethos of the season. One can almost hear his ancient cry, “Repent and change your lives!”
- ▶ Today we begin a new liturgical cycle: Year A. This is the year we hear the story of Christ from St. Matthew’s perspective. Matthew’s audience was primarily a middle-class, Jewish Christian audience. He uses scriptural images, stories and themes familiar to a Jewish community to relate the Christ event.
- ▶ We are reminded of the importance of the liturgical year. We are reminded that the entire mystery of Christ is made manifest to us in the liturgical year and that the primary truths of Christian faith are manifested throughout the seasons.
- ▶ Advent prepares us to encounter the truth, reality and dogma of the Incarnation that we will experience at Christmas.
- ▶ We remember three comings of Christ—the Christ who came once in history, the Christ who comes each day in our hearts and the Christ who will come at the end of time.
- ▶ Salvation history is remembered and made present to us in our Advent liturgies.
- ▶ The season invites prayerful diligence as we remember

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

© Mary Birmingham,
2011. All rights reserved.

Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.

¹Linda Gaupin, *Catechesis and Liturgy, Course Text. 52.*

what God has accomplished through his Son Jesus throughout human history, what he is doing now and what he will continue to do in our lives as we go about the business of building his kingdom on earth as we wait in joyful hope for the kingdom yet to come.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading 1: Isaiah 2:1-5

- ▶ Today's prophecy looks toward the future coming of the *One Who is to Come*.
- ▶ Isaiah paints a vision of the end of days that he received in prayer. His portrait is depicted in vivid detail.
- ▶ All the people of the earth converge in stately pilgrimage to the royal court of God.
- ▶ Nations settle their differences as a result of the arbitration of God, the just judge.
- ▶ Division and animosity will be replaced by eternal peace.
- ▶ Isaiah's eschatological vision looks to that future day when the material world will end.
- ▶ In the new world envisioned by Isaiah war will give way to a new epoch of peace, presided over by the *One Who is Heralded to Come*.
- ▶ Here on earth we will continue to struggle with war, hatred and animosity but that will be tempered with the hope for the realization of God's future promised world—the Parousia.
- ▶ God empowers, enlightens and energizes his people to work to bring about his reign here on earth as we await the final eschaton.
- ▶ Our responsibility is to live righteous, authentic lives—to be icons of peace and solidarity in a divided world.
- ▶ Isaiah's eschatology assumes that the nations will not only learn to live in peace, they will be called upon to live in God's light and to follow God's will in all things. Without such commitment, abandonment and detachment peace will be impossible.
- ▶ Would that nations today take heed. More is spent on the nation's war chests than on food to feed a starving world. Isaiah envisions a transformed reality. He implies that peace is only possible if it is first borne in the hearts of believers.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ How can this reading be a word for you today?
- ▶ If you learned that the world was ending tomorrow, would you be ready? What would you want to do if you received such news?
- ▶ What is Isaiah’s response to the conditions here on earth as we await the final eschaton?
- ▶ Name some ways that you are living in the Light of the Lord as you await the final day of the Lord. Where is growth needed?
- ▶ What obstacles in our lives might keep us from living up to Isaiah’s vision for a transformed, peace-filled world?
- ▶ What needs to be born anew in your heart this Advent season?

Second Reading: Romans 13:11-14

- ▶ Paul’s letter to the Romans was intended to unite poor Gentile Communities with the Jewish Christian communities in Jerusalem.
- ▶ Some scholars believe this is Paul’s last will and testament. Others suggest that it is simply his catechism of Christian doctrine.
- ▶ Others insist that it is simply Paul’s own theological musings.
- ▶ What is certain is that the letter sets forth a theology of salvation, rooted in God’s merciful love, extended to the human race through the sacrifice, death and resurrection of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Paul believed that a person is saved through faith in Jesus Christ crucified—not rigid adherence to the law
- ▶ Paul was certain that human beings were not saved by their own merits—only by the grace of God and faith in the *One He Sent*.
- ▶ People had a difficult time accepting his theology. Justification through adherence to the law was a well-established religious principle. To go against it was akin to denying treasured Jewish doctrine.
- ▶ Paul’s message was urgent. He worried that people would not accept the truth that they were truly and mercifully forgiven by God.
- ▶ Both the letter to the Romans and the Galatians are similar in content. The latter was written in a more frenzied manner from a prison cell. The former was more toned down, deliberate and well thought out.
- ▶ Paul believed that transformation of the person simply required the ascent of faith in Christ.
- ▶ Christians believed in a realized eschatology—the kingdom of God now in the

present and the kingdom of God yet to come.

- ▶ They had one eye focused on the future age as they struggled to live authentic lives in the present age.
- ▶ Their challenge was to walk as children of the Light in this realm—in the now as they await the not yet.
- ▶ The challenge for Christians was to demonstrate that they were Christians in good standing—that their faith and life were strong indicators of their Christian status.
- ▶ The bottom line question for them was, “Do I love enough? Do I love others as God loves me?”
- ▶ The more a Christian was rooted in love, the less that same Christian succumbed to sin.
- ▶ Sin lost its power in the face of love.
- ▶ Paul believed that Christ would return in his lifetime.
- ▶ We know his assumption was incorrect.
- ▶ However, the challenge for us is the same as it was for his community—to live each day as though it were our last—to live as though Jesus Christ would return in glory with trumpet blast before the evening supper!
- ▶ Our guard against the slippery slope of sin is to put on the armor of Christ’s light—clothe ourselves in his righteousness and live as children of the Light.
- ▶ In so doing we promote peace, love, solidarity and unity, not hatred, war, division and oppression.
- ▶ Advent is a perfect time to try on that armor once again and refit it to the person we are called to become this Advent Christmas season.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ Where is the good news in this reading?
- ▶ How would you answer the ultimate question Paul challenged his Roman community to answer –“Do you love enough? Do you love others as God loves you? “Name the ways that you can respond affirmatively to those questions. Where, on the other hand, does love need to grow in your life?
- ▶ Some people invest a great deal of time and energy in their conversion journey just as Paul’s communities did initially. As time wore on and Jesus’ return was not as immanent as they thought, they needed to be constantly challenged and uplifted. The same is true for us today. As time wears on we often become lax in our enthusiasm and zeal for what initially touched our hearts. We become less faithful to Gospel living. Can you see this possibly happening in your own life?

What can you do to safeguard it from happening?

- ▶ If someone were to tell you that it is very easy to fall away from Christ and his Church, what would you say are the reasons for falling away in the first place and what needs to be done to prevent it from taking place?
- ▶ How would you live your life differently if you were as attentive as the ancient communities were attentive to having one foot firmly planted here on earth and the other foot walking toward the future Day of the Lord—our future heavenly kingdom?

Gospel: Matthew 24:37-44

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Today's gospel is a synoptic apocalypse. Like its Jewish fore-runner, synoptic apocalypses speak of events that took place before the Jewish uprising in the year 70.
- ▶ It was believed that apocalyptic events would signal the arrival of the final eschaton and Jesus' return.
- ▶ Apocalyptic belief insists that God will judge human beings at the end of the world. The saved will be divided from those who are not saved. Some people will enter the new kingdom and others will not.
- ▶ People are to be vigilant and watch for the observable signs. Apocalypses exhort a posture of preparedness.
- ▶ Jesus is just as mistaken as Paul about when the end would arrive. Like Paul, Jesus thought all would culminate very soon.
- ▶ Biblical scholarship suggests that this is a sign that God's will is not set in stone and subject to change. God can make the days culminate quickly for the sake of believers (Luke 18: 7-8), and he can extend them for the sake of mercy and grace (Luke 13:6-9). Jesus' mistake points to another reality. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Many people have less trouble believing in his divinity than his humanity.
- ▶ The councils of Nicea and Chalcedon declared the belief that Jesus was fully divine, but not fully human (Docetism) a heresy. Docetism insisted that Jesus was not really human like we are human. He possessed future knowledge unlike other human beings. The Councils reaffirmed the truth that Jesus was fully human and fully divine.
- ▶ If not fully human, then his sacrifice on the cross meant nothing. Of course God as divine being could easily endure the horror of the cross!

- ▶ On the other hand, Jesus as fully human, who suffered pain as we suffer pain, who endured the shame and tragedy of the cross for our sake—who knew betrayal as we know betrayal, who walked in our shoes—indeed redeemed us by his sacrifice on the cross. His sacrifice meant everything.
- ▶ The Gospels demonstrate that Jesus in his humanity could not see into the future and did not know all there was to know in the universe.
- ▶ We are to be ready for Christ's return at all times, especially when we least expect it.
- ▶ As we wait we have a responsibility to be in solidarity with those in the world who are hungry, oppressed and who also wait not just for Jesus' return, but for a morsel of bread to fall from the rich man's table.
- ▶ Our waiting is an affirmation of hope that Christ will come, but that he is also right here—struggling with us in our adversity, walking with us in our shoes.
- ▶ We are people who wait, it is a holy endeavor. Waiting strengthens the soul.
- ▶ We are not to concern ourselves with the time and place. What makes us think we should be privy to the day and the hour when not even Christ and the angels knew?
- ▶ When we try to dictate the time and place we always show ourselves the fool--as if God could be controlled according to our arrogant whim! Never!
- ▶ A recent supermarket tabloid's headlines reveals our fascination:
 - "Scrolls unearthed in Turkey reveal God's warning of a second Great Flood...Also revealed: Christ about to return to Earth! The true date of Doomsday! Secrets of daily life in heaven! You have a last chance to repent! Other Miracles Ahead! Herbs to cure all diseases! Sins of past forgiven! Downfall of all tyrants! Another Garden of Eden!" (Sun Newspaper, October 14, 1997)
- ▶ The only thing we know for sure about the time and date of Christ's return is that we don't know and that *soon* can be a very long time—so far over two thousand years long!
- ▶ When we place too much focus on *when* we become distracted from the work at hand to continue to build and prepare Christ's kingdom here on earth.
- ▶ Our anticipatory waiting requires that we live righteous lives as we live in the tension between now and not yet.
- ▶ We will be asked what we did to make the most of the time we have been given. We will be asked the question Paul's community was asked—"How have you loved me [God] and one another?"
- ▶ Matthew's culture had no concept of looking toward the future. It was a present-centered existence. It was very difficult for believers to look to a future day. All they had was today.
- ▶ They expected Jesus' *immediate* return. Imagine ourselves in that milieu. We would be clamoring for answers. Why has he not returned? Was his entire message to us nonsense? Can he be believed at all?
- ▶ Matthew's intent today is to assuage those fears and respond to their questions. Of course, Jesus can be believed—you have the witness of his life, sacrificial death

and resurrection.

- ▶ Matthew gives them eyes of faith, helping them to look beyond today to a future promise.
- ▶ Twenty-first century culture is the opposite of first century culture. We fail to see the present even when it is taking place under our proverbial noses. Our focus is so future oriented that we fail to see what is staring us in the face.
- ▶ The challenge of Advent—its clarion call—is for us to pray quietly and act decisively—to work as though Jesus' return is before the midnight hour—to continue to build his kingdom here on earth until the last one standing lets the door hit him on the backside as he leaves this realm and enters the place his toil has been leading him to all along—the place prepared for him by the Master who went before us to prepare the way.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ Do you look more to the future or are you a present-oriented person? What are the values associated with each stance? Why is it good to be a present-oriented person? Why is it good to look to the future? What is the challenge of both postures? Does one posture dominate the other? If so, what are the implications?
- ▶ Have you ever had to wait for anything important? What did the waiting teach you? Why is waiting a good thing?
- ▶ What do you think about our belief that Jesus will come again to take us all home to be with God? How do you think that will take place? Do you think we will see that day? How should we live as a result of what we believe?
- ▶ In what way, if any, am I living as though Jesus' return was imminent? What could I do to more completely live as though Jesus' return is imminent?
- ▶ Do you fear the judgment of the last day? Imagine standing before God. Considering your life to this point, what will God affirm in you? What might he suggest you could have done better?
- ▶ What steps might you take this Advent season to become more aware and participate in the life of Christ who lives within, the Christ who is to come anew at Christmas and the Christ who is to come at the end of the world? What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

#1. One way I am living in the light of the Lord is by trying to be the best minister of the Gospel I can be. I have a passion and love for God that excites me to share with others. However, I need to grow in trust and in diligence to prayer. One can never communicate with *The God Who Lives Within* too much. I constantly look for ways to improve my communication with God. Discipline is a crucial tool. The more disciplined I become in my prayer life, the more I talk to God and avoid letting my busy life distract me from my relationship with God. I look to that future day of the Lord, but I must make the most of every day here on earth and try to the best of my ability to be an agent of peace in all my encounters.

#2. Waiting is good for the soul. There are times when I curse that statement. Yet it is true. I have been waiting for twelve years for God to bring resolution to a young man's mental illness. There are days when I beg the Lord to come quickly. Every plan I have for his care is upended by the disease and my inability to secure the help he needs. It is the definition of powerlessness.

However, in that twelve year sojourn I have learned what it means to love when love is nearly impossible. I have been stretched to see God in the midst of insanity and to trust that he loves my child as much as I do. I have been challenged to appreciate that we have not walked this journey alone. For all the insane escapades my child has undertaken it is a miracle and a testament to God, Emmanuel that my child is still alive.

Waiting for God is the only posture of Christian discipleship because in truth one need look no further than the human heart for the realization of that waiting. We do not wait alone.

This Advent season is a reminder that God walks with us, is with us and goes before us. God knows the desires of our hearts before we do. God knows that when I as mother am forced to care for and love a very sick, mentally ill child I have been given empathy to love all those forgotten mentally ill people who walk our streets. When some see the homeless they see a faceless person begging for bread. When I see a homeless person I see my child and by extension I see the face of Christ. It is the gift of his disease, but it is also the curse because with it comes the broken hearts of those who are powerless to do anything but love those so inflicted. Such is the paradox of the cross.

#3. An optional Advent reflection from a previous year: This Advent if I do nothing more than consciously become aware of my participation in the life of Christ who dwells within—I have done much to prepare a stable for the renewal of Incarnation that also resides within each of us and gives us our divine dignity and origin. The following reflection that I found on a recent trip to Ireland had a huge impact in bringing that awareness into my life in a more focused way. It is a wonderful Advent/Christmas reflection.

In one of my stops to an ancient Celtic monastery I came across a small travel guide with a spiritual twist. I was profoundly touched by the wisdom of Incarnation expressed by two monks in this little travel guide. An Irish author of intriguing travel guides of Ireland in his book, "The Secret Places of the Burren" tells of an encounter with two men he met during

his travels across Ireland. One was a brilliant nuclear physicist and the other a distinguished doctor. Both were in their early thirties, unmarried and both joined contemplative orders. They shared what motivated their decision to join the contemplative order. John Feehan describes how this encounter not only gave him an appreciation of their decision to make such an abrupt life change, but also a glimpse into the meaning of life itself. His description of what they shared touches the very core of life itself and the meaning of our Christian existence.

Feehan describes the basic philosophy from which these men gave up their lucrative lives to spend them in contemplation of God: He said: “The human being exists solely for the purpose of becoming an earthly life form of God... The inner dimension of man should rule his life, and that inner dimension was God. Everything else was a mere side show. One lived a life in practical terms in as close a union as possible with God. One did not do it for a reward. One did it because this is the only rational explanation of life itself, the only explanation that gives meaning to death. The average person on the outside would be inclined to feel that if you take away money, sex, power and success from life you are left with nothing and there is little point in staying alive. The monk sees it differently. All these things are to him transient. As soon as you achieve one you want more and more and each achievement becomes emptier and shallower and brings on more and more stress and tension. The highly successful man in material terms may well be the unhappiest...

The best things in life are those which come from within: creativity, tolerance, living in the present, meditation, contemplation and above all a loving care for all life, not just human beings, but every living thing. A life lived in those terms brought unbelievable happiness”, said the monks. They made an analogy, “A stained glass window looked at from the outside is merely a grayish glaze. But looked at from the inside is a thing of indescribable beauty. If you are on the inside you can experience everything to its fullest. If we accept the ‘inner’ life it does not really matter whether or not we are in a monastery---fulfillment of life’s purpose will be ours.

Both men are now dead. One gave up world-wide fame, the other great wealth. Neither would concede that they gave up anything. They would contend that they gave up trash for everything. Indeed both were two of the happiest men I ever knew.
(p. 106, 107)

Advent is an invitation to look at the beauty of the stained glass prisms of our soul—of my soul and the souls of all human beings—and see the face of God.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Advent Overview
Liturgical Year
Eschatology or the End Times: Heaven,
Hell and Purgatory

Catholic Social Teaching
Kingdom of God
Faith

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

ADVENT OVERVIEW

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Advent is a season that prepares for Christmas. Advent is considered in tandem with Christmas. The season does not stand alone. Today we will focus our attention on what we celebrate in this very important season that prepares for the Incarnation of Christ. Thus, our doctrinal session today will focus on the OVERVIEW OF ADVENT.

LITURGICAL YEAR

Today begins a new liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ unfolds throughout the coming year. It is most appropriate that during the season of Advent we focus our attention on what the Church celebrates in the LITURGICAL YEAR.

ESCHATOLOGY or END TIMES and HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.

Isaiah heralds the *One Who is to Come* who will usher in the *Last Days*. Matthew reiterates the apocalypse found in the other Synoptic Gospels. The Scriptures of Advent are alive with cosmic images of last days and end times. Advent is an appropriate time to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about last things. Thus, today our doctrinal session will address ESCHATOLOGY or END TIMES and HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Isaiah looks to the Day of the Lord in which peace and justice will be established. Advent is a time we consider our responsibility to promote peace and justice in the world. Catholic social teaching addresses our Christian responsibility to promote peace and justice. It is thus an appropriate time for us to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

KINGDOM OF GOD

Advent proclaims the coming of the Messiah who will establish God's kingdom of peace and justice. It is thus an appropriate opportunity to focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about the establishment of the KINGDOM OF GOD.

FAITH

The prophets of Advent sound the clarion call for conversion and deep abiding faith. It is time to take stock, to pay attention to God's invitation to grow in or relationship with him. It is thus an appropriate time for us to reflect on what the Church teaches about faith itself. Today's doctrinal session will focus on FAITH.